



October 29, 2019

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Dear Mr. Teel,

I received your request for information under the Public Records Act via email on Oct. 21, 2019.

You requested the following:

- *All documents or statements reflecting the current district wide, unpaid amount of student meal debt*

The district reviewed your request under the PRA. Based on the responsive records, we have compiled the following answer to your request.

As of Oct. 21, 2019, our districtwide meal charge debt balance was \$106,175.54. Please note that this includes meal debt rolled over from 2017-18 and 2018-19 as well as the 2019-20 school year thus far.

In Bellingham Public Schools, meal debt is governed by our policy 6700 and procedure 6700, which were adopted on June 27, 2017.

With this response, we have fulfilled your records request and now consider your request closed. Please feel free to contact me at (360) 676-6420 or [Dana.Smith@bellingshamschools.org](mailto:Dana.Smith@bellingshamschools.org) if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Dana Smith  
Communications Manager | Public Records Officer  
Bellingham Public Schools

enclosures: Policy 6700, Procedure 6700

## 6700 Policy – Meal Charges

Bellingham Public Schools feeds every child who wants a meal and staff do not initiate conversations with children regarding meal charges.

Because hunger is an impediment to learning, no child will be denied a school meal because of an inability to pay.

The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs are integral in ensuring that students have access to nutritious meals to support their academic success. It is also imperative to protect the financial stability of the district's Food Services program.

Approved By: Greg Baker

Adopted: 06/27/17

Signature Date: 06/27/17

Approved: Superintendent Approved

### Cross References:

### Content

Policy 3440 Food, Food Education, Physical Education & Physical Activity.

## **6700 Procedure – Meal Charges**

The following procedures establish a consistent process for charging meals when students do not have money to pay, minimizing the identification of children who do not have money to pay, preventing meal charges, and collecting on unpaid meal charges. Such a procedure ensures that Food Services staff, school administrators, families, and students have a shared understanding of expectations in these situations.

### **Charging Meals**

Any child who requests a meal will be served a fully reimbursable meal from the daily menu that meets the USDA's nutrition standards for school meals. Children are allowed to charge meals to their account even when an unpaid balance is on the account. No a la carte charges will be allowed for any grade. Adult meals cannot be charged.

Children who have money to pay for a reduced-price or full price meal at the time of service must be provided a meal. The money may not be used to repay previously unpaid charges if the child intended to use the money to purchase that day's meal.

### **Protecting Children's Confidentiality**

Bellingham Public Schools strives to serve each child with dignity and respect. Hand stamps, stickers or any other means of overt identification of children with unpaid meal debt in the cafeteria or the classroom are prohibited. Additionally, children with unpaid meal debt shall not be required to work off their debt, including, but not limited to, wiping down tables or cleaning the cafeteria.

All communication regarding unpaid meal debt will be directed to parents or guardians. Schools may send a letter home with children in an unmarked envelope. If a child asks about his or her meal account balance, Food Services staff will communicate with the child discreetly.

### **Preventing Meal Charges**

To prevent meal charges, the Food Services program will:

- Notify families of low account balances; and
- Ensure that all eligible families are certified for free and reduced-price school meals by:
  - Providing all households with school meal applications prior to the start of the school year;
  - Providing school meal applications in the primary language of the parent or guardian. Households with questions or who need assistance with completing an application may contact Food Services secretary at (360) 676-6504, or Family Engagement at (360) 676-6456;
  - Regularly utilizing data provided by the state or other school district officials to certify eligible children without an application;
  - Making efforts to directly certify a child for free or reduced-price meals through the state when their household has unpaid meal fees. If the school district is unable to directly certify the child, the district will contact the family by phone and/or in writing to encourage completion of the school meal application; and
  - Completing a school meal application for any child known to be eligible for free or reduced-price school meals if the household fails to apply.

### **Notifying Households of Low and Negative Account Balances**

Food Services will use the district's automated communications system to notify parents of negative and low account balances. Parents may also sign up for low balance notifications through the online payment system.

Food Services staff may send a negative account balance statement home in an unmarked white envelope with the child's name, via the school office.

### **Collecting Unpaid Meal Debt**

Any household not certified for free school meals with a negative school meal account balance will be contacted promptly by school Food Services staff by email, phone, or letter home about their negative balance. The Food Services program will work with principals, school counselors, and/or teachers to understand the child and parent's situation and work with families on a case-by-case basis.

For households that cannot afford to pay their school meal charges, food services will work with them to establish a payment plan. Households that are certified for free or reduced-price school meals at a point later in the school year will not be required to repay school meal debt accrued earlier in that school year.

### **Donations and Uncollectable Debt**

Private donations to offset unpaid student meal debts will be accepted by the district through the standard donations process. The district welcomes families to donate excess funds left in their child's Food Services account, except in the case of households approved for reduced-priced meal benefits whose accounts must be refunded per federal requirements. Private donations made to individual schools will be sent to the district office to be equitably distributed throughout the district.

Each fall, the school district will support children participating in the school meal program by paying the balance of uncollectable accounts ("bad debt") from the previous school year using donations and/or other non-federal funds (e.g. general fund). An account is deemed uncollectable if the child has incurred charges and is certified for free or reduced-priced meals or all attempts to collect have been unsuccessful and/or the child is no longer a student in the district.

Adopted: 06/27/17

Revised: 06/27/17